

Six Multicultural Service-Learning Lessons

I Learned in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina

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As a teacher educator who regularly teaches a multicultural education course, I have often employed service-learning as a pedagogical strategy in assisting pre-service teachers to understand better the various multicultural topics we discuss, such as racism, heterosexism, and sexism that impact our schools. I have never been disappointed in the experiences of my students who engage in a multicultural service-learning experience. Through the direct experience of working with individuals who are linguistically, racially, and economically often quite different from themselves, they increase their cultural responsiveness as a preservice teacher not only intellectually but also socially and emotionally (Boyle-Baise, 2002; O'Grady, 2000; Wade, 2000).

Therefore, when I was presented an opportunity through a major U.S. disaster relief agency to serve at a shelter housing Hurricane Katrina evacuees, I jumped at it. I knew that this would be a challenging service experience, challenging me in different ways from the kinds of service (tutoring, working at a homeless shelter, and the like) in which I usually engage. So on September 11, 2005, the anniversary of another U.S. tragedy, I flew from northern California to southern Mississippi to serve as an Assistant Manager in a shelter. The experience was in a word, extraordinary and little did I know that I would be drawing on all the multicultural skills and knowledge that I learned and tried to impart to preservice teachers in my classes. I should also note that I did not go down there as an academic researcher but

rather as a regular volunteer. I did take a notebook with me to keep a daily journal, but after much debate I decided against taking a tape recorder with me. Therefore, all content in this personal perspective piece is the result of reflections on my experiences as a volunteer.

A Lesson on Bridging Differences

It wasn't until I arrived in Mississippi that I learned that I would be working in a shelter, and not the usual relief type of shelter, but a church shelter. As an agnostic who loosely studies the philosophy of Buddhism, I was initially a bit apprehensive. However, my fears were allayed when it was clear that overt proselytizing was not going to occur. As a result, I was given the space and time to examine the situation from the outside, to take my own time in exploring this new cultural setting. For example, I attended a church service because I had never attended a Southern Baptist church service. On another level, I soon found myself engaging in discussions on theology and other topics with people I usually associate with extreme evangelicals on talk show radios. I quickly realized that I shared a lot in common with individuals who I normally might consider very, very different from myself. By consciously suspending my beliefs and fears about evangelical Christians and assuming a stance of humility, I was given an opportunity to learn from, work with, and live with people with whom I ordinarily would not have met in my current life and work unless I purposely sought them out.

I took this lesson back home to my classes, where it came in handy in a multicultural education class I teach. Because so many of the topics we cover can be so divisive, I used my own experience as

evidence that seemingly vast chasms of difference (in this case ideological and political) can be in fact bridged if all parties are willing to give a little of themselves. I was given the opportunity to live the advice I give students: get to know other people whom you perceive to be different from yourself; reach out and put yourself in those uncomfortable social spaces, and see what you learn. I was fortunate that I was with people who gave me this opportunity and I, in turn, realized I had given them the same lesson. On his last day of volunteering, one church member who was a self-labeled "conservative" and with whom I had some serious conversations about religion in public schools and gay rights, said to me, "You know what, I am glad I met you and you are one of my favorite liberals." At a loss for words, I quickly replied, "Well, you are one of my favorite conservatives." In the end, we both parted as more informed individuals because we did bridge our ideological differences. I was very grateful this was the first important lesson I learned because it paved the way for subsequent lessons.

A Lesson in Learning

I wasn't in Mississippi long before I realized the many levels of learning that were taking place, or more accurately needed to take place. As an individual and at a personal level, I felt very poorly equipped for some of my duties. As an Assistant Shelter Manager my duties consisted of assisting evacuees with finding loved ones, helping some of the many shelter children with homework, scrubbing toilets, making breakfast for shelter residents, assisting walk-in clients, distributing resources as necessary, assisting evacuees with getting their FEMA checks and being a general all-around problem solver. I was out of my

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familiar environment. I realized quickly that I was experiencing what my students might feel in the multicultural service-learning events I assign them, particularly if it's their first experience. The projects in which I ask my students to engage might seem easy or nonthreatening (for example, tutoring an English language learner) from my point of view but not necessarily in their eyes. Being reminded of this fact reinforced for me the need to over prepare them for the context and possible experiences they will have in working with English language learners. It is this critical need for preparation which leads to my second point.

It became obvious as time went on that the volunteers, who were mainly middle-class European American individuals (and quite often retired), had little experience interacting with other people who were linguistically, racially, and otherwise culturally diverse. Furthermore, it was clear that the volunteers had been given very little diversity or multicultural training. For the most part, many were inadequately prepared at an emotional and intellectual level on the most basic issues of cross-cultural communication and working in a culturally diverse setting. For example, there were rules concerning the supervision of children. The rule was that each child's guardian or accompanying adult (some children had been separated from their immediate parents/guardians) was to be responsible for his or her child (ren) at all times. This is a logical rule and was very necessary for safety reasons as pedophiles had been identified in other shelters. The cultural issue arose when more than one volunteer would find a child being supervised by an unrelated adult, usually a family friend or extended family relative. The volunteers would still be upset because it was not the child's own "adult." These volunteers failed to realize that child care among friends and extended family members is very common in many cultures, and is common if one does not have the money to pay for child care services. I explained to these volunteers it wasn't that the child was being unsupervised; rather, this was a common cultural practice. On more than one occasion, I found myself in the role of being a multicultural educator but to a very different audience than pre-service teachers. At times, I found myself in the delicate and rather uncomfortable position of being a diplomat. One event I remember in particular concerned the attire of some of our residents. There were several young (ages 18-23) African

American males who resided in the shelter. One in particular, who was 20 years old, would "sag" or wear his pants very low on his hips. As a result, his underwear was quite visible. The church personnel and other volunteers were very upset with this, and their attempts to get him to change his dress habits were ignored. The issue, in fact, divided his family and they were threatened with eviction if he did not "pull up his pants." Essentially, this issue was one of differing views of expressing respect in a religious context, and this point was driven home by the young man's grandmother who told me, "He needs to dress properly; this is shameful. He is in a house of God." To make a long story short, I sat down with the young man and his mother to obtain their perspectives. In short, they felt that the church personnel were being excessively intrusive. They noted that this was a personal choice of how to dress and asked if the young man was accused of being noncompliant in any other way. I said, "No." They then went on to say that a lot of young women dressed in ways that would also be considered "shameful in a house of God, but no one said anything to them." I admitted this was also true, but we were really stuck between the proverbial "rock and a hard place." The church not only could legally evict them but there was nothing the relief agency could do because they were also guests of the church. My suggestion leads to the next lesson I learned—one of empowerment.

A Failed Lesson in Social Justice

The young man and his mother were not happy to learn that they could be evicted. The mother felt her son was being unfairly singled out and that "those white church men are scared of my son and want to get rid of him." I responded that there was a double standard concerning dress, and the son had not caused any other trouble, so it was unfair; however, our hands were tied at this time. I ended the conversation by saying I really didn't have an answer and I am NOT telling you what you should do. I just wanted them to know the facts and conditions of the situation, but ultimately the decision was up to them. I just wanted them to be aware of the possible consequences, and I wished I could come up with an idea that could satisfy both parties, but I was at a loss. I also pointed out to her that regardless of how this situation turned out, she could also contact the national headquarters of the

relief agency for which I was volunteering and report this incident. Additionally, she might also consider contacting a local chapter of the NAACP. I cautioned her, however, she better have a backup plan in case the church did evict them. This was where I left things and the matter was forgotten until a few days later when I noticed the young man had pulled up his pants considerably but not totally. After some reflection, I realized the halfway gesture of pulled up pants was a very symbolic gesture of compromise. It was enough to placate the church members even though they were not completely happy. At the same time, the young man was asserting his right to dress as he pleased by *not* completely complying with the church request. While stalemate might better describe this situation, it did solve the problem under these stressful conditions. In the end, it was clear this was a classic battle of power with racial overtones and provided a perfect case study for my preservice teachers.

A Lesson in Surviving

One of the most interesting aspects of working at the shelter was observing how the residents coped with stress. One of the most obvious ways was to find or engage in some sort of daily routine. I believed that routine provided a sense of stability. By engaging in a routine, residents could exercise a sense of control and predictability over their lives, which in turn helped them begin the process of healing from the traumatic events they experienced. Very quickly, I observed how the institution of school helped residents, especially the children, feel a sense of normalcy in their lives. Indeed, the entire shelter seemed to rally around the notion of "doing school." In the morning there was a sense of excitement as the kids got ready for school. Breakfast times were changed to accommodate children having to catch the buses that came to the shelter to pick them up, and sack lunches were made for them to take to school. In the afternoon, there was also an air of excitement as the kids returned home from school and engaged in various after school activities, such as playing outside or doing homework. When I noticed how the tradition of schooling seemed to provide a sense of relief to the residents, a counselor and I sought to build on this. He started playing sports with the children after school by organizing various teams. I started homework sessions, where I would help students with homework. For those children who did not have homework

or were too young to have homework, we would have storytelling time, where a volunteer would read picture books to them. On school nights, the quiet hours started earlier so kids could get to bed and the shelter manager and I made sure to secure necessary school supplies for our young residents. In short, a significant aspect of the shelter's daily routines revolved around the shelter's 15-30 children and their schooling. In the end, I realized that school was an institution that everyone in the shelter had shared at some level regardless of race, age, economic standing, or background. It was this shared commonality that enabled the residents to collectively feel a sense of normalcy in their lives.

A Lesson in Coping

Helping the children with homework, particularly the older ones enabled me to talk to them and listen to their stories of how they were coping. In particular, I remember a group of four adolescent girls ranging in ages from 13 to 16 who provided me the most insight into the ways in which they coped with living in a shelter and being displaced from their homes. In everything they told me, the overriding theme was about fitting in and not standing out as a Katrina evacuee. They told me for instance how they all agreed to use their room number at the shelter as an apartment number, so no one knew they were living at a shelter. They also changed the name of the church to one that incorporated apartments. Since they were the first ones picked up on the buses, this seemed to work. I am not sure if their being picked up first was a deliberate decision on the part of the school to spare them possible embarrassment or was simply a logical one. They also told me of how they wished that a support group of some sort at the school had been formed where they could all get together and just talk about their experiences. Finally, they discussed how they hated being referred to as refugees. They preferred *evacuees*. Their advice was insightful and helpful, and if there was anything I took away from our conversations it was that the children themselves

knew a great deal of what adults could do to help them work through this traumatic event.

A Lesson in Hope

When I left Mississippi, I had mixed feelings. On one hand, I wanted and needed to get back to my regular job. On the other hand, I felt guilty that I was going to be returning to the life I left behind and simply pick up where I left off. I knew many shelter residents would never be able to return to their homes, let alone lives they had once known. In addition to this fact was the reality that I had to say good-bye to a few residents with whom I had developed friendships. I knew from previous experience that under emergency conditions, such friendships are often fleeting and temporary. As a result, I was not expecting to hear from anyone again after I left. Several weeks later, however, I heard from one young woman, a teenager, with whom I spent a lot of time talking. I was surprised to hear from her but also gladdened to learn that she was making the most of her new life and holding out hope for a brighter future. Let there be no doubt, the road had been tough. She has had to not only overcome the usual angst of female adolescence but also the challenges of doing so in an unfamiliar cultural setting. She faced and still faces some formidable odds, but she never gives up. In our e-mail exchanges we talk about all kinds of things but mostly her future. The lesson I learned from this young woman is that living in hope and sharing it with others is what enables us to overcome adversity.

Conclusion

In the end, my experience was everything I hoped it would be and more – it was a quintessential multicultural service-learning experience. Addressing issues of race, class, and gender are always difficult, but when these issues are set in a context of crisis, they can seem overwhelming. While I would never hope for an event like Hurricane Katrina to happen again, I did want to maximize what could be learned from this event in terms of multicultural

issues. In many respects, it was precisely the context of crisis that forced many of us, including myself, out of our comfortable and complacent existences. It provided the backdrop or relief to poignantly make all of us face the neglected and egregious effects of racism and poverty in our nation. The filthy and polluted waters of New Orleans forced us to face these facts; the U.S. could not deny what and who were literally washed up on to the shores of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. However, water can also be cleansing and purifying. My experience provided me with insights, knowledge, and firsthand experiences I could share with future teachers and renewed my commitment and dedication to addressing issues of race, class, and gender. This might not seem too different from what was doing before Katrina. I guess this is true except to say that when I contemplate deleting service-learning from my courses, I am reminded by my recent experience how extraordinarily powerful this learning experience can be. When I want to give it up, all I do is remember the lessons I learned in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the courageous individuals I met, and I keep going.

References

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